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ABSTRACT

The ability to use language as a means of thought expression is a growth process. It is necessary, therefore, for college-level developmental courses to concentrate on strengths stemming from the student's communication in an informal environment, rather than on skill deficiencies reflected in test scores. To achieve this, the teacher must know the student well: it is essential to hear what is said and to accept what is written, because the student's spoken and written words reflect the social contexts in which he or she lives. English teachers must create a stimulating environment that helps students experience a sense of control of, and active participation in, their own learning. Reading assignments should force retrospective, perspective, and introspective thought, so that students learn to formulate questions and to respect their own insights. In writing, assignments should be structured according to a three-step process: (1) discussion, to hear the ideas of others, (2) silent reflection on the ideas expressed in discussion, and (3) writing for a first self-analysis. The goal of the developmental course is to free students to use language for their own purposes. (MAI)

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# Developing Language Skills with Four Letter Words

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In the recent past a great deal of emphasis has been placed on language development in the early stages of growth. The emphasis is lessened as maturity occurs. This may be due to the hierarchical nature of developmental theories which begin with language acquisition in infancy and culminate in symbolic structuring in adolescence. While these theories have been invaluable in helping to explain linguistic and cognitive development, they have led to conclusions in some cases that language development is a result of physical maturation. This limited view of language development can have serious consequences for older learners who have not developed according to the suggested sequences.

The negativism that surrounds developmental courses at the college level reflects the misunderstandings held by many people. Some of these courses are entitled "Remedial English," a label which implies that students are deficient in their native language. This is misleading, for no students are deficient when they use language in their own informal environment. They are well able to communicate and are often disillusioned when they find that their language is unacceptable in an academic setting.

Placement tests which measure previous learning are often used as determinants in assigning students to these courses. These tests are useful in pointing out when students are not doing what instructors think they should be doing, but they are not helpful in indicating what students are capable of doing. Therefore, the focus in these "remedial" sections of Freshman English is usually on deficiency rather than possibility. As a result, students attend because they must attend. Their interest, however, is not development, but escape. They want speedy completion of the required course so that they can become a part of the mainstream of academic life.

Much of the stigma of developmental classes could be erased if educators would accept the fact that the ability to use language as a means of expressing

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thought is a life long developmental pursuit. Language development is a continuum and individuals occupy different points at various times according to the situation in which they find themselves and their ability to adjust to that situation. The students in developmental classes are not necessarily slow learners; they have not mastered the art of flexibility. It may be necessary for these students to develop more sophistication in their use of language in order to cope with the demands of academic life. This reality must be faced, but it does not have to be coupled with rejection and disgrace. Through concentration on the strengths which students possess rather than on the deficiencies which tests indicate, skill development will occur. Because most students are unable to change their language habits unaided, they need developmental classes. Within these classes, it is believed the refinement of teacher attitudes and behaviors can facilitate the developmental tasks themselves. This assertion rests on three assumptions about language.

1. <u>The stimulus for and reaction to verbal language is a reflection of students' personalized views of reality</u>.

In his preface to <u>Emile</u>, Rousseau challenges teachers to "study their pupils better."[1] The implication is that teachers should make an effort to understand their students as thoroughly as possible. The personality of students is often the key to their unique learning styles, for students are products of their physical, mental, and emotional development. The competence that they display in overt behavior is a mirror of the underlying personality enmeshed as it is with past experiences, present realities, and future possibilities. Helping students to use language as a means of coping with their experiences necessitates teachers who can discover the uniqueness of individuality. It can be said with a four letter word. Instructors must <u>KNOW</u> their students.

How does an instructor come to know students in a multiversity where classes are large and lessons are often depersonalized for expediency and efficiency? It is not easy to be sure, but English teachers have a distinct advantage over all the

others if they capitalize on the students' use of and response to verbal language.

James Britton has said that "the world toward which our behavior is directed is the world as we symbolize it or represent it to ourselves."[2] Following this line of reasoning, it can be said that students' personal representations are the magnets to which all of their experiences cling and these personal representations are the surest indicators of who students really are and what they are about. To know them is to know how they represent reality. This kind of insight comes through a willingness to hear what students are saying and to accept what they are writing. The written and spoken word are indicators of what they are thinking.

Every written assignment in a developmental class should be preceded by an oral interplay of ideas. After discussing a selected topic of interest, students should reflect silently on the ideas expressed during the discussion. Then, they are ready to write. The first written sample need not be shared with anyone, but it should be analyzed by the student for strains of thought which can be developed into a formal communication.

The purpose of this three-step process -oral discussion, silent reflection, and writing for a first self analysis - is to afford an opportunity for students to listen to the ideas of others, share their own ideas spontaneously and silently assimilate their thoughts before recording them as communication. Experiences of this kind tend to invite an honest revelation of thought for they encourage students to perform naturally without threats of reprisal for speaking, writing or thinking incorrectly. From the very first encounter, students and instructor can express themselves openly in an atmosphere of trust and respect. On this foundation, the instructor can be sure that when there is an opportunity to read what students have written, it is truly a personal expression of an experience through language. The procedure represents what students think and highlights the principle that what they think defines who they are.

Lerone Bennett, speaking at the College Section Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1976 said: "There are no unengaged words. The word is a world and behind the word is a world view. The word necessarily reflects the pressures and preoccupations of the writer's....culture."[3] This approach is a beginning for knowing students far more profoundly than merely counting the sentence fragments and split infinitives in their papers.

Once instructors know their students, they can assist them in developing improved interpretations of reality. According to James Moffett, "the school is responsible for helping students render experience into words."[4] The emphasis here is on a four letter word - HELP - which raises another assumption.

2. Instructional intervention can enhance language development.

In the process of development, language serves to organize thought that emanates from experience. Organized thought, in turn, is the basis for equitable solutions to practical problems. The thought processes that one uses to solve problems is a reflection of the cognitive developmental level that has been reached at the time of the experience. This does not mean that higher cognitive levels cannot be reached. Cognition develops in diversified and challenging environments. The task of the English instructor then, is twofold: (1) to create a stimulating environment and (2) to provide opportunities for students to use language in making sense of that environment. The relationship between language and cognition must be explored.

Language is the vehicle that affords the development of sophistication in thought as perceptions are organized and systematized. "Through words human beings formulate generalizations, abstractions and other forms of mediated thinking. Yet, these words, the fragile bridges upon which.....thoughts must travel, are socio-historically determined and therefore shaped, limited or expanded through individual and collective experience."[5] The written and spoken words of students reflect the social contexts in which they live. If powerlessness is predominate in their en-

vironment, they will hesitate to employ creativity in thought and language. Paulo Freire uses the terms "Objects" and Subjects" to refer to those people who are manipulated by social events and those who are manipulators.[6] English teachers must attempt to create "Subjects" by allowing students to experience a sense of control in the learning environment. Regardless of the sociohistorical context from which students come, they should experience freedom in the classroom, for "effective education requires the recognition and utilization of the potential in all human beings to participate actively in their own learning. Therefore, educational success depends upon a change in the social environment - a break with past alienation and marginality."[7]

The cultural milieu of students is a blue-print from which the structure of life is erected. Instructional intervention may provide materials that can be used to construct a firm foundation. Conceptual development, which occurs during the construction process, is unique to the individual.

Lev Vygotsky distinguishes between two kinds of concepts in his theory of intellectual development. Spontaneous concepts are defined as those which are formed as a result of everyday experiences. Non-spontaneous concepts or scientific concepts are those which are formed as a result of instruction either formal or informal. The most important characteristic in the formation of concepts, scientific or other, is one's consciousness or awareness of the process. Consciousness presupposes a generalizing function that is possible only when one is able to perceive an act in its totality. Vygotsky believes that "school instruction induces the generalizing kind of perception and plays a decisive role in making one conscious of his own mental process."[8] James Moffett declares that much of what we call teaching students to think is a matter of making them conscious of abstracting. He points out that "if a student becomes aware of his abstractive process by discoursing progressively up the hierarchy and by examining his discourses in collaboration with peers and a guiding adult, he has an opportunity to correct and adjust his cognition."[9]

Instructors must help students gain this awareness through language experiences.

Reading assignments that force retrospective, perspective and introspective thought should be chosen for developmental classes. It is not enough to select controversial topics and discuss them. An effort must be made to have students immerse themselves in the subject matter and reflect on how it affects others as well as themselves particularly in a cross-cultural context. They can accomplish this by role playing other personalities and interpreting selections from different vantage points. Reading autobiographies and biographies of the authors before a selection is read will also help them to discover why an author thinks as he does. Reading more than one selection written by the same author often reveals changes in the author's thought patterns as experiences or situations change. Studying authors in this way helps students to realize the effect that personal experiences can have on a written work. When it is possible to analyze the process that others used to arrive at conclusions, students can decentralize their own thoughts and this will be apparent in their written and spoken interpretations.

Another valuable experience is to have students write in different time periods. Have the student assume the identity of a person who lived 100 years ago or compare the views of two authors who although separated by a span of 100 years wrote on the same topic. Have the student describe the role of a young person from a very different culture either in the United States or from overseas.

In helping students move to higher intellectual planes, it is necessary to heed the words of Vygotsky and allow instruction to march ahead of development and lead it. "We must aim not so much at the ripe as at the ripening function."[10]

Finally, and most important, English instructors must FREE students to use language to fulfill their own purposes. This four-letter word leads to the third assumption.

3. Language is not a given, but an attribute over which students can exercise some control.

Students often come to college believing that what is written is sacrosanct. Therefore, they will read a text while seeking only a literal comprehension and without daring to become more involved. It is difficult to combat this practice but an initial step can be taken in a developmental class by devoting a class period to an open-ended discussion on "what is reading?" This discussion can be followed by exposing students to a one-line quotation and asking them to think silently about it for ten minutes. Then the instructor may ask them to record their thoughts, followed by a sharing of the recorded interpretations. The responses will probably be very different and students will be surprised to hear that there is no "correct" interpretation but that all responses carry at least some validity. The value of the experience lies in its revelation of reading as an interaction between the words of a writer and the thoughts of a reader. The reader's interpretation of the writer's words reflects his own perception of reality and as an interpretation, it is never incorrect. Indeed, Hans Enzenberger calls reading "an act of anarchy because the reader is always right and no one can take from him the freedom to use a text in any way that he wishes." [11]

In reading and writing, students should use language to move beyond what is known to what may be. George Kelly calls this the "language of hypothesis" because it requires that we think in the invitational mood rather than the indicative mood; the former invites creativity of thought while the latter accepts the obvious. [12] All great minds have in fact pursued the unknown or the unexpected. If students are to become educated thinkers instead of channels of pre-digested knowledge, they must do likewise. Efforts must be made to develop within students the ability to formulate their own questions before and after reading rather than waiting for someone else to formulate questions for them. A question that a student forms becomes a hypothesis which must be validated through reading. The answers to questions will represent personal interpretations and can lead to new and exciting ideas.

When students are free to interpret and use written language in accordance with their own thoughts, they become the "masters" and not the "dupes" of symbols - to borrow James Moffett's terms. Their world becomes a stage and their experiences a script which they portray through language. The instructor can serve as a manager of props and as one who draws the curtain. The action belongs to the performers.

The words are short, but their meaning offers a challenge of long-range importance. They are fundamental principles to guide instructional practices so that students can view themselves as banks of their own experiences. The process of depositing into and withdrawing from this bank is the essence of language learning. Language instruction provides an expedient way of completing deposit and withdrawal slips and facilitating any adjunct functions necessary to make the banking possible. As in the business world, language development in the world of education also requires efficiency. The more efficient and sophisticated the teaching-learning processes, the more stable and valuable the results.

## Notes

[1]Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile ou de l'education. Paris, Garnier 1964,p.2.

[2]James Britton, Language and Learning. Baltimore, Penguin, 1972, p.14.

[3]Lerone Bennett, Jr. Presentation at the College Section Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Chicago, 1976.

[4]James Moffett, A Student Centered Language Arts Curriculum. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1968, p.11.

[5]Nan Elsasser and Vera P. John-Steiner, "An Interactionist Approach to Advancing Literacy," Harvard Educational Review. August 1977, p.359.

[6]Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York, Seabury, 1970. p.57.

[7]Elsasser and John-Steiner, op.cit., p.362.

[8]Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, Thought and Language. Trans. and ed. by Eugenia Hanffman and Gertrude Vakar, Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1962, p.91.

[9]Moffett, op. cit., p.27.

[10]Vygotsky, op. cit., p.104.

[11]Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "Reading is an Act of Anarchy," Journal of Reading. March 1977, p.478.

[12]George A. Kelly, "The Language of Hypothesis: Man's Psychology Instrument," Journal of Individual Psychology. November 1964. p.138.